

# Puppy Stream

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Lately, when the world is bleak and bad news is unavoidable, the only calm I have found is in a puppy stream. As I fluctuate between panic, procrastination and panicky procrastination, I keep one tab open in my browser and click back to it throughout the day. The banner reads: *Dog bless you - warrior canine connection - pec*. On the other side of my screen a young golden retriever takes a nap. The stream is slightly fuzzy; giving the illusion of a 90s VHS, but that is okay. A small red circle indicates LIVE. Baby dogs exhale in the slow laboured way of pure sleep, their tiny haunches rising and falling. When they are grown up and fully trained, they will serve as therapy dogs for veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and mobility impairments.

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Two nights ago I was crossing Harrow Road as a toddler let out a scream. His mother reached out toward him but he kept wailing. *Jesus fucking Christ*, I thought, *put a lid on it*. It started to rain. I scrunched my face, hateful and annoyed, and got out my keys. Suddenly, yet slowly, from stage right limped a very old Jack Russell. He was all whitened brows

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and stiff joints. Noticing him, my anger dissolved. I just wanted him to get home safely, without any pain. I wanted to make sure he was okay. What does it say about me that I get my heart broken by an old dog struggling slowly down the road and not at all by a small, crying human?

Animals bring out the best and worst in us. That's an aphorism, sure, but there is something to be said for how telling someone's distaste of animals is, or how effortlessly dogs and cats can tame our impulse to coldness, to holding other humans at arm's length. Have you seen the pictures of Vladimir Putin cradling a Bulgarian sheep dog? The puppy gazes into the off-frame horizon with an expression hovering between wistful and petrified. It is scientifically proven that cuddling an animal increases levels of oxytocin in the blood of a person.

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I wish I could afford my own pet. I'm a novelist and fumbling academic, a sometime teacher, and do most of my thinking and preparing alone. When I'm drafting, I work mostly from home, but the prospect of a dog seems too daunting. It almost equals the magnitude of having a baby. I betray my naïveté and childlessness with this analogy.

Studies have shown that dog owners are less likely to suffer from depression, and heart attack patients with dogs survive longer than those without. Surely a dog would be the salve,

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the balm for my anxiety and existential paranoia? I keep putting off the prospect of a pet. I tell myself that right now I'm too selfish, too itinerant, for this kind of obligation. Maybe if I moved in with a partner we could raise the dog together, comfy in our coupledness. Maybe next year. Maybe the one after that. Maybe if I made more money and didn't have to worry about what outsized hurdles the future holds. If I was someone better, I'd be ready for my dog. The dog of my dreams is a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel. How can anybody resist them, with their limpid eyes and gumdrop faces. Their silky long ears, a dog the size of a small printer, loving and dopey, loping around. An army of King Charles Spaniels could take over the world. Encountering one's favorite breed of dog on the road becomes akin to spotting a celebrity.

To envy the owner is to envy the lifestyle that accommodates the dog. Certain breeds, in our Instagrammable age, have come to stand for symbols of social and domestic aspiration. Front and center on posters, mugs and all over pubs and parks is the comically squished face of the pug. According to the London Zoological Society, pugs are one of the oldest breeds of dog in the world and went out of fashion until a pug named Moshu starred in *Men in Black* in 1997. After that, they faced a resurgence that endures today, notwithstanding their genetic breathing and health problems. Even Zadie Smith is not immune to the tragic affability of the pug: "I can assure you that if my pug died, I'd be devastated", she once said. According to Wikipedia,

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the pug is often described using the phrase *multum in parvo*, meaning ‘a lot of dog in a small space’. What about too little dog in a big space? What breed would that describe? I suppose it would be sizeist to describe someone as ‘a lot of personality in a small body’, or would it?

Thanks to memes, we have the ubiquity of the Shiba Inu. There is no dog hipper than a Shibe. Have you ever tried to pet a Shiba Inu that’s not yours? They shirk, they know they are precious. I should do a survey on this. Have you ever looked at someone else’s dog with all the longing in the world and thought, if you had that buddy, you would never feel alone? Have you ever looked at a teacup Chihuahua and imagined long Sunday afternoons on a sofa in pajamas, cradling hot drinks as you glaze at cheerful box sets? Have you ever looked at a loping St. Bernard and attached the expectation of a large garden, maybe a townhouse crammed with storybook children?

Sometimes when I’m walking from point A to B in my day-to-day life, I get hypnotized and detained by dogs. I start waving at the dog in my path like I’m a shipwrecked sailor trying to make contact, often rudely and blithely ignoring the owner altogether. Fawning over a Bichon Frise, or a Puggle, I tussle their ears and pet without permission, and only after the dog has sauntered away do I think: was I invading its personal space? If the dog could talk, would it tell me politely to back off? My friends with dogs tell me that being an owner unveils a whole community of proud

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dog parents, friendly faces in the park who raise gloved hands at each other in a gesture of kinship, unmistakable recognition. If real life was a computer game, owning a dog would unlock a new secret level.

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As I type this, a puppy wakes up and shifts his soft sand-coloured head onto a paw, and back again. Another puppy rests his muzzle on his sister's flank. If only you could see them. They are the best companions. The Internet in my home drops in and out as if it's the early 2000s but ever since I've left the puppy feed on, I kid you not, the connection is a lot more reliable. Solitude engenders the clearest but also most maudlin thoughts. Things can muddle, become vague; hallmarks of bad writing. The fridge hums. Everyone's in the office, or going about the city, this time of the year (mid-November, year 2016). I seek life online, but that's not the right place to start. This year has devolved into an angry echo chamber of think-piece upon think-piece, and it's only getting worse. Where do these puppies sit in the intersection between think-piece and puff-piece? Maybe puff-pieces are preferable; at least they're honest in their frivolity and disregard for seriousness.

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My first dog was a Pomeranian named Fritz I. He was collectively ours, the first canine Teo. I hardly remember him, this blonde cloud of shyness bumping into corners, unhappy in our old house.

One day, Fritz I ducked out of the brown grilles of the gate and fled down the concrete, never to be seen again. A year or two later, we adopted a Pomeranian mix, a brownish-carmine little tussle whom we named, unimaginatively, Fritz the Second. Nowadays people seem to call adopted dogs “rescues”, but Fritz II was in no need of rescuing. He was more tiny fox than dog, and humped every piece of furniture and resting leg with an unapologetic fervour. He too ran away, and for years after my siblings and I used to say that he mated with every bitch in the neighborhood. We would spot a small brownish dog and wonder if he/she was Fritz’s.

2016 is the four-year death anniversary of our final dog, Gawain. My parents and brother are still grieving him, and claim they aren’t ready for another. Gawain was a Border Collie in Singapore, and I think of his shaggy coat in a tropical climate and worry that he was always uncomfortable but too kind to make a fuss. That it was in his blood to want to run in bigger fields than we could afford. That it was in his nature to herd, when all we had to offer him was a tiny half-concrete garden, and city pigeons. The first time my brother and I took him for a walk, Gawain was so small that he got exhausted from going down one street and I had to pick him up. He was the size of a Macbook, only he felt much lighter. His fur was so fine and soft and he wriggled in my arms.

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We ardently loved his father before him, Lancelot. Lance resembled Richard Gere as much as it is aesthetically possible for a handsome Border Collie to look like a dashing actor. My sister and I used to point at Lance and Gawain and say, look, it's Richard Gere and the small one is Colin Farrell. We swore likeness in their long-lashed eyes, the arrangement of features. Every houseguest we pointed this out to laughed and nodded before looking away and changing the subject. And now that so much time has passed, I wonder why we wanted to draw other people into a joke perhaps only we found funny, and which now serves as an anecdotal relic of shared history.

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Lance had a real dignity to his bearing. He disliked it if we faced in his direction while he ate his dinner or shat in the grass. He would shoot us a hurt, accosted stare. When my father was posted to Myanmar for work in the mid-nineties, Lance followed. For two years Lance and Dad enjoyed a giant garden that opened out into the gray-green painterly stillness of Inya Lake. The house my father lived in was black and white, just like Lance. My father faxed me updates of his working week, and how Lance was doing (always well - hurtling everywhere, over-excited, doing a running start off the crumbling jetty and straight into the lake). We visited during the summer holidays. The arid, indolent stretch of June, not wanting the days to count down to departure. We watched MTV all day and bought movies from the tape shop; they were such low quality we could barely make out

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what was going on. Geckos clicked and thronged. There were blackouts every evening, and thunderstorms. Red mud plumed as a car pulled out of the driveway, Lance barking after, and I remember even the tenor of his voice was different in Yangon. The same way people have an Inside Voice and an Outside Voice, Lance had a Yangon Bark and a Singapore Bark. He was happy and fulfilled with so much space.

Lance and Gawain, our monochromatic sweethearts. We loved and lived with them for a total of seventeen years. I still dream of them some nights, either together or individually. In certain dreams Lance is the one who talks. He has a cartoon animal neutral accent. He talks in non-sequiturs. He doesn't sound like Richard Gere.

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Some days I comfort myself by thinking that the dogs and humans that have left us don't have to experience current catastrophes and see the world as it presently is. Pie-shaped and prone to hatred. We speak of doglike loyalty, the way these animals adore us with a shameless simplicity that most people are incapable of. And it wouldn't be healthy or sustainable anyway, or to love so completely, to put pride aside and roll over to expose your belly. To lose such a love is its own kind of bereavement, deserves respect. *They're just animals*, some people might say. These people are not dog lovers. It is much more than that. Nobody finds it easy to

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confront death. Of course you can't equate the death of a dog with the death of a human. But I'm thinking of the shared mortality of every living thing on earth. It is a myth that one dog year is equal to seven human years. Regardless of the ratio, dogs age faster. We'll leave it at that. And maybe this acceleration encourages them to cut out all the bullshit. I'm more than likely projecting, anthropomorphising when it suits me. And up till now I've avoided the uneasy possibility that maybe dogs and animals at large are easier to care about because of their contingency to humans, the fact that they can't really argue back and they are vulnerable to abuse or neglect. Maybe I find it easier to talk about how much I love dogs than how much people and their words and opinions matter to me.

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It's getting late in the day and today I'm working in the palatial British Library with its smart wooden tables and wall-to-wall shelves of leather-bound books. People rustle their library-issued clear plastic bags, sniffle, cough, peer into their mysterious screens as they bite one fist. It makes me nervous and inspired, being surrounded by so much studious humanity. It feels like everyone is so much more focused than me, and working on worthier things. As has been my habit of the last few weeks, I keep the puppy stream minimized behind my Word document. Every few minutes I move my cursor to the left and see all my open windows and applications in miniature. The dogs are napping. When this

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batch grows up, they'll get replaced. I haven't been watching for long enough to witness the switch, nor to fully consider whether it might disturb me. A continuum of puppies reminds me of the final episode of the nineties sitcom *Mad About You*, where the parents hide the death of the dog by getting an identical one. They manage to keep this deception from their daughter for six years. I watched that episode on TV when I was twelve and remember being incredibly disturbed by that. In fact, it ruined the entire show for me and is all I can remember about it: this farcical deferral of the unfunny fact of death.

Several think/puff/pieces of click-bait I've read whilst procrastinating have remarked on how this year is extra death-heavy. We've lost so many notable people. Bowie, Prince, Cohen, to name a few; famous person deaths occurring with such regularity as to elide our collective bereavement. But isn't that how time works? Cycles of aging reaching the apex of death after death, compounded by the horribleness of politics, of ghastly disasters, bad things happening to good people, amplified in crystal-clear pictures, skewed news, content piled atop content. Cushioned in my comfort, I wring my hands and hold up the past to the tenuous present, comparing unfavorably. What happens next? Is there any point in wondering? The puppy feed goes on.



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